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Although I tried to keep a constant journal throughout my work at Classic City High School, I found my thoughts were better expressed once I could look back on the semester as a whole. Rather than organizing my experience week by week, I found it easier to write by topic, trying to explain what students made the largest difference, and what moments had the largest impact.

I have kept all the names the same, and feel that most of the students I write about could be identified despite a pseudonym. If you want to use my paper for any reason I will leave the censorship up to you.

Beginnings

The first thing I noticed at Classic City High School was a collection of student-made projects on one of the walls. Each one tried to answer two questions: Where do you see yourself in five years? Where do you see yourself in ten years? The answers seemed unbelievable at best.

“I see myself earning millions of dollars in the NBA, and retiring after ten years.”

“I see myself graduating from medical school. In ten years I want to be retired with a family.”

“I see myself being a famous musician and retiring rich in ten years.”

Compared to my high school experience classic city seemed like the Twilight Zone, where student attendance seemed a fortunate surprise, lessons were given through online modules, and the discipline code was non-existent.

I was assigned to work with Mrs. McNair’s 11th grade American Literature class, which consisted of about 10 students on a good day. The student I worked with was Don, who had just recently transferred to the school and struggled with a learning disability making reading a challenge. I helped him to practice for the English section of the graduation exam. As I left after my first day I checked for Don’s project on the wall. His seemed quite humble amongst the rest.

“In five years I want to have a good job. In ten years I want to get my family out of the hood.”

Don

The most difficult part of my tutoring experience came from the fact that I was only there once a week, and students needed help each day. Don was always ready to work when I came in, but Mrs. McNair would inform me every other week that he had gotten to far behind, then stressed about falling farther behind, which ultimately resulted in breakdowns where he wouldn’t come to school for a day or two, making him more behind. It was a vicious cycle.

Don’s parents had decided to move him from his high school to Classic City mistakenly thinking it would be a better fit. The methods of teaching at Classic city put most of the weight

on the student, as they dealt with online modules done individually. These were a large source of stress, and Don would frequently start to break down even while I was working with him. On one occasion a large list of instructions sent him into a panic until I broke each step down into manageable parts. Don's largest difficulty lay in his underestimation of his abilities. He was a smart kid, easily able to complete the assignments once broken down, but he feared even approaching a large block of text. Once he was calm enough to start a project he had no difficulty in finishing it.

Towards the end of the semester Don was starting to skip more and more, having fallen farther behind, eventually dropping the course. It's difficult to accept that Don's goal of having a decent job in five years might be as unlikely as his classmates becoming an NBA players, or famous musicians, and I hope he manages to find an education program better suited to his needs.

Discipline

I've always had trouble with the disciplinary aspect of school. When I have volunteered at other schools, you find you lack the power and authority to keep the students focused. This seems unavoidable, as the last thing any teacher needs is an inexperienced college student coming in and making waves, but it doesn't relieve the struggle.

The problem of discipline was only magnified at Classic City, as disciplinary policy in non-existent. There, teachers struggle with the same lack of power I have experienced. It is not uncommon for students to show up late for classes, leave mid-sentence while you are tutoring, and refusing to do school work.

The school's policy on discipline seems one of desperation; if the kids had any rules they felt too stifling they might stop coming to school. I can't agree with this policy personally, although I'm sure it was born out of some degree of necessity. It lowers the expectations of the students and sends them ill prepared to a business market where rules are so dominant.

Mimi

Mimi wasn't part of Ms. McNair's class, although Mrs. McNair often invited her to stay and use a computer, contingent on good behavior. We started talking after I had finished helping another student, and though I have no idea how the topic came up, we discovered that we both had been diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder. Although my experience is limited to Cyclothymia, or "Bipolar Light," where as she had suffered from manic episodes, it was nice to find someone that shared the mental and emotional drain experienced day to day, and the struggles and benefits of medication. Mimi was the first person at Classic City I was able to connect to on a more personal level than simply tutor/student, and helped me to view each student as a whole, rather than focusing solely on their education.

Motivation

Without any disciplinary policy, Motivation was achieved through the proverbial carrot much more than the stick. Luckily most students seemed more willing to work when they had a tutor, and enjoyed the personal attention.

For any assignments outside of the online test prep, it was easy enough to keep students motivated enough to complete them. Online test prep was consistently a problem, with an hour and a half of multiple choice questions and reading passages making almost every student complain, and rightly so. During my first few visits I consistently had students walk out of the room mid-question for a break, which I first took quite personally. By the end of the semester they were at least asking permission before stepping out, and I would try to strike a deal that if they were focused we could take a break half way through.

I was quite impressed with Mrs. McNair's ability to keep everyone motivated throughout the course, as I'm sure it is quite difficult to maintain high morale on test prep weeks.

Michael

I didn't work with Michael often, just once or twice when neither Don nor Parker was in class. He is quite smart, but his attitude reminds me quite a bit of the fictitious, rebellious Holden Caulfield. He would readily call out assignments as being "bullshit," and generally would refuse to do the assignments after that.

Once in particular he was assigned a project to find ten songs that reflected American values. He objected that American values had become clichéd within America, and only served to mock those outside of America who did not have the same freedoms. Instead of the original assignment he wrote a letter to a hypothetical Ethiopian child urging them to never listen to mainstream American music due to its "fakeness". He struggles with articulating his views, though he has the potential to be a skilled satirist.

On another occasion, after we had finished a small project on *The Crucible*, Michael asked whether I thought a person's favorite genre of music was a result of their genetics or their upbringing. He surely didn't realize how far he struck into the heart of modern psychology, and that the nature/nurture question was one of the largest ever asked. If students could see how their questions are often the same ones being asked by professionals I'm sure they would be more motivated to attend college to seek answers.

Although getting Michael to work on the assigned material was a bit of a challenge, I quite enjoyed the strength of his personality, and hope I have many more students in the future like him.

GAVS and e2020

Although Mrs. McNair did give quite a few lessons in class, most of my time was spent either helping students to review separately for state guideline tests or catch up on missed lessons, both of which involved going to the media center and working on a computer. The media center had a rather lacking selection of any *print* media, and was rather just another classroom filled with computers for students to work at.

Most of the assignments were through either GAVS (Georgia virtual school) or e2020, marketed as an "engaging online learning environment that is designed to capture student's attention," although that is one thing it assuredly does not do. These virtual lessons are something I was entirely unfamiliar with in my education, at which I am quite glad. The lessons fail to provide depth and significance to the material, and largely consist of students copying down key terms that they would then use for the following exam.

I doubt anyone truly supports these programs out of genuine fondness. Rather they seem to result from the needs of an incredibly unorthodox class, with students all moving through the material at different times depending on what they had missed.

The students, much to their credit, managed to struggle onwards through these lessons, despite what seemed like the most genuine attempt to make each module as mindless and repetitive as the last. The lessons also failed to place any emphasis on what information was most important, which I suspect will result in more commonplace words – “allusion” for example – being forgotten alongside the more pedantic terms of our discipline – litotes, metonymies, etc.

I tried entering with an open mind, and I have no doubt that technology can be used to *supplement* education, but these programs have made me more than a little bit of a cynic towards educating through technology.

Parker

Tony, or Parker as he liked to be called, was the most motivated student I tutored. He was willing to sit through hour after hour of online test prep without complaining. If I found the online programs dull from my Thursday visits, it’s hard to imagine how he continued every day of the week.

I also helped him write an essay for *The Crucible*, which was one of my most difficult experiences at Classic City High School. The students had watched the movie, and read the Cliff Notes, but had not read the actual play. Helping Parker to write a paper about character development when he was only familiar with the roughest outline of the plot proved to be a challenge. I obviously didn’t want to write the paper for him, but it was a difficult balance to achieve between helping to guide him through the story and having him find his own supporting evidence for his thesis. I like to imagine that the majority of the paper contained his own thoughts, although I think the truth – that only one of us had actually read *The Crucible* – made that doubtful.

Abstractions and the Individual

It’s easy to forget that all the theory learned in college classes needs to ultimately be practical, and I wholeheartedly support supplementing the weekly classes with actual tutoring. The trenches are just as vital as the Ivory Tower.

I had trouble adapting what I was learning each class with my experience tutoring. We can diagnose everything that’s wrong with education in our society, but it is not society you find in the classroom, rather it is individuals. All of our fancy hermeneutics start to give way to the need for genuine action on a very personal level. Each student is unique, and most of my energy while tutoring went to finding what motivated each person, and how best to explain what they were having problems with.

I believe that theory has a rightful place, but I have started to see just how limited its practice in the classroom can be. If I were to repack the books I read for this course I would choose ones that focused far more on individual interaction, motivation, and teaching methods rather than anything with addressing societal issues. An understanding of these societal issues is important, but too often I never learned any concrete solutions for a classroom setting.

Conclusion

I can't view my experience at Classic City in an optimistic light. I have continually struggled with the question of how much we accomplish there. Hopefully they will score higher on their standardized tests, but I doubt that in six months most of them will remember the difference between a puritan and a transcendentalist, and why should they? It isn't important in their lives, and certainly isn't entertaining or memorable presented through the online modules.

I could never shake the feeling that what we were doing was too little, too late. I don't know where the problems of education are best combated, but any strides the students make at this point do very little. It's certainly not a cheery note to end on, but I doubt educators would have much to do if the world was a perfect place.